Chapter 4
The Early Stages of Development: Planning and Launching Communities

Draft

From *"Cultivating Communities of Practice: a Guide to Managing Knowledge"* by Etienne Wenger. Richard McDermott, and William Snyder. To be published by Harvard Business School Press.

It is 1994. After ten years of advanced technical development, Auger, Shell's first Deepwater Tension Leg Platform, begins operation in the Gulf of Mexico. Anchored to the ocean floor by high-tension wires, it floats on the surface, gently rocking with the waves, as it pumps 90,000 barrels of oil and 300 million cubic feet of gas a day.

When Shell first started deepwater exploration of the Gulf, the division was organized by function. Now that Auger was operational, the company needed to improve efficiency and replicate the design. Shell redesigned its deepwater operation so that the core organizational units were cross-disciplinary project teams, called asset teams, responsible for exploring or developing a geographic region of the Gulf. Each asset team operated as a separate profit and loss center, with full responsibility for both sound scientific analysis and financial return. Asset team members were housed together and reported to the same general manager. Having adjacent offices helped the scientists and engineers to understand the full spectrum of issues in exploring and developing the site. This integrated work space facilitated much tighter integration between disciplines. Sharing goals helped scientists and engineers better understand the financial as well as the scientific implications of the tools and approaches they used.

Yet, the very thing that made these teams work well—common goals, shared focus, physical proximity, working rapport—led to the isolation of the professional staff. In the new organization, people literally had to track down colleagues on other teams, often several floors away, or make an appointment for an informal discussion. As a result, staff members spent far too much time looking for information from other teams or past projects. The new organization had eliminated the old functional silos, but the project teams had become a new kind of silo that isolated people from other members of their discipline.

To address this problem, Shell created "networks" of people who shared a common discipline or interest. Since the networks were formed around technical topics, their members knew what information was useful, what they should document, what help other network members really needed. The networks linked professionals across the project teams. One of these networks brought together geologists, reservoir engineers, petrophysicists, and other geoscientists interested in turbidite structures, a geological formation fairly common in the Gulf. They called themselves the "Turbodudes."

The Turbodudes started with a small group of about fifteen geoscientists meeting weekly to discuss key issues in developing turbidite reservoirs. The group consisted of leading experts in the field. Like most early communities of practice at Shell, they talked about technical problems they were having in their work and thought through alternative approaches. They had a lot of energy for these discussions. As one geologist said, "With so many meetings that aren't immediately relevant to your work, it's nice to go to one where we talk about rocks."

Several years later, the Turbodudes are still going strong. Their discussions continue to be very informal. Typically, a member poses a question or problem and the group makes observations and suggestions. The community coordinator lightly facilitates the discussion by helping people explicate the logic or assumptions behind their observations. If a speaker seems defensive and closed to the ideas of others, the coordinator reminds him (as the name reflects, most Turbodudes are men) that the purpose of the meeting is to raise many different ideas. When the group seems to be "grilling" a speaker, asking many detailed questions but offering few alternatives, he reminds them that they owe the speaker some ideas of their own. He then suggests they shift focus and discuss other ways the speaker could approach the problem. These community discussions seem very spontaneous, but this spontaneity is more planful than it appears.

Between meetings the coordinator "walks the halls." He drops in on community members, follows up on meeting items, asks people about hot issues to discuss at the next meeting, and informally lets others know about upcoming meeting topics on which he would particularly like them to join the conversation. These informal, one-on-one discussions ensure that the "spontaneous" topics raised at the next meeting are truly valuable to the community and that those attending will have something useful to add. In fact, the Turbodudes' coordinator tracked the number of people attending the meetings and found that the strongest predictor of high attendance was how much time he had spent the previous week walking the halls. Still, he was not able to get all the people he wanted to join the meetings. One turbidite expert was reluctant to attend the Turbodudes meetings regularly because he "didn't have time." The coordinator then offered tailored invitations, encouraging him to come when the topic was particularly important to him.

Turbodude members also connect through small projects. The Turbodudes frequently identify technical problems that are too big to solve completely by the end of a meeting. The coordinator works through some of these on his own with the input of a few community members. Small teams of community members handle other issues.

As the Turbodude community developed, the number of potential projects increased. They identified many more issues that could be resolved or turned into guidelines than they had time for. As the Turbodude coordinator said, "At the weekly Turbodudes meeting, I feel like I am in the middle of a rushing stream, with so many ideas and potential improvements to our work rushing by."

As a result of the Turbodude meetings, one-on-one connections, and projects, Turbodude members have developed a real understanding of each others' work, needs, and perspectives. When they walk into a Turbodude meeting, they do so with many relationships already forged. Like people walking in their neighborhood, they come to the meeting with multiple purposes, and those purposes intermingle on "the street" of community meetings. Of course, the Turbodudes did not begin with the relaxed intimacy their meetings came to possess. The character of the community evolved as the community matured. The planners of the Turbodudes could not dictate this character. Instead they had to find the topics, the people and the forums that would help the community develop.

The Stages of Community Development

Like other living things, communities are not born in their final state, but go through a natural cycle of birth, growth, and death. Many go through such radical transformations that the reasons they stay together have little relation to the reasons they started in the first place. Although communities of practice continually evolve, we have observed five stages of community development: potential, coalescing, maturing, stewardship, and transformation. (See figure 4-1.) They typically start as a loose network that holds the potential of becoming more connected and thus a more important part of the organization. As they build those connections, they coalesce into a community. Once the community is formed, they often grow in both membership and in the depth of knowledge they share. When mature, communities go through cycles of high and low activity, just like other living things. During this stage, communities often take active stewardship of the knowledge and practices they share and consciously develop them.

<<figure 4-1 here>>

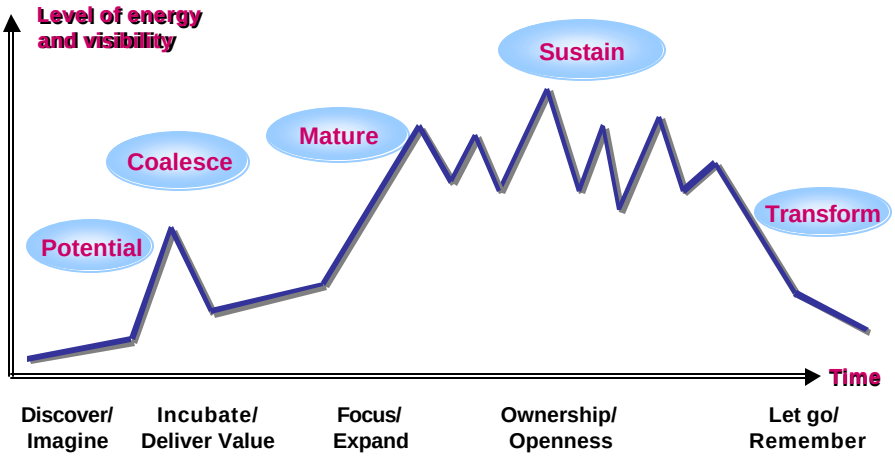

Figure 5.1
The jagged line stands for the level of energy and visibility that the community generates over time.

As communities evolve through these stages, the activities needed to develop them also change. This chapter and the next trace the issues communities face during these stages and the activities that can help them develop.

A community's development, like an individual's, is rarely smooth. It frequently involves painful discoveries, difficult transitions, and learning through hard-won experience. One community stalled when its passionate leader changed roles. Community members were so dependent on him they found it hard to take on the tasks he so invisibly assumed. A community of production engineers was reluctant to welcome new members. They didn't want to let go of the intimacy they had developed, even though they knew they had to expand to survive. Each stage of community development, like each stage of human development, confronts the community with a central challenge. We will describe each challenge as a tension between two opposite tendencies that the community must address before it can move to the next stage. Of course, each community experiences these tensions differently. Some view them as major problems and conflicts, with community members aligned on opposite sides. Others consider them an opportunity to grow and solidify the community.

Although a developmental model provides some direction, it cannot be taken too literally. These stages and their sequence are merely typical, and there can be wide variations in the ways communities experience them. Just as many of us still experience adolescence at fifty or some children grow up very quickly to deal with extreme circumstances, communities vary widely in their developmental sequence. Some communities go through one stage rapidly; others spend much time in the same stage. Some seem to skip a stage and may later go back to deal with earlier issues; others appear to struggle with unresolved tensions from several stages at once. all the issues at the same time. Some do not make it all the way through. Sometimes communities reach their full potential at stage two or three. For example, one community of production engineers felt that the most valuable thing they could do was help each other solve everyday production problems. They realized that they could also rationalize production schedules, develop collective procedures, and more fully steward their knowledge. But they chose to continue focusing on sharing tips. There is nothing wrong with this decision. It may have been the very best thing for them to do. Still, having a sense of stages and associated issues helps you foresee problems you are likely to face, understand the changing needs of the community, and take appropriate action. It helps you be patient when a community needs to deal with its development in its own time and prod appropriately when it is time to move on.

In this chapter, we discuss stages 1 and 2, which cover the process of launching a community of practice. We will discuss stages 3, 4, and 5 in the next chapter, where we address the challenge of sustaining a community through its growth and maturity, and possible midlife crises, until its end or transformation.

Stage 1. Potential

Community development begins with an extant social network. Any important topic in an organization usually attracts an informal group of interested people who begin networking. Whether they are simply a loose network or have already begun to see themselves as community of practice, these are the people who are likely to form the core group of the community and take the lead in pulling it together. Like an embryo, a potential community already comprises some basic elements of a developed community and has the full potential of becoming one. At some point, the idea of forming a community is introduced into this loose network, and this prospect starts to redirect people's attention. They start to see their own issues and interests as communal fodder and their relationships in the new light of a potential community. As the sense of a shared domain develops, the need for more systematic interactions emerges and generates interest. Some people usually step up to take responsibility for getting the community started.

Typically the key issue at the beginning of a community is to find enough common ground among members for them to feel connected and see the value of sharing insights, stories, and techniques. At this early stage, what energizes the potential community is the discovery that other people face similar problems, share a passion for the same topic, have data, tools, and approaches they can share, and have valuable insights they can learn from each other. The more passionate people feel about those concerns, the more drive the community is likely to have. But passion alone is not enough to make a community. A community is driven by the value members get from it, so people need to see how their passion will translate into something useful.

- As the community begins, the key domain issue it faces is how to define the scope of the domain in a way that elicits the heart-felt interests of members and aligns with important issues for the organization as a whole.
- The key community issue is finding people who already network on the topic and help them imagine how increased networking and knowledge sharing could be valuable.
- The key practice issue is identifying common knowledge needs.

These three dimensions are related. As you establish the scope of the domain, the dimensions of the community become clearer. As you build the community, people identify common knowledge needs.

Discover and Imagine

Starting a community of practice involves balancing discovery and imagination—discovering what you can build on and imagining where this potential can lead. This is a delicate balance. If you ignore the networks that currently share knowledge about the topic, you will fail to enlist the participation of the most likely early contributors. But if you focus only on current networks, you will not cross enough personal boundaries to bring new ideas into the community.

To build the community, the leaders and organizers need to discover who talks with whom about the topic, what issues they discuss, the strength of their relationships, and the obstacles that impede knowledge sharing and collaboration. Building on these networks and appreciating the common ground people already have is key to success in the early phases of community development. People actively networking on the topic often already know what knowledge is important to share and what problems are involved in connecting with each other. These same people are likely to be core members of the emerging community. By conducting either a formal or informal social network analysis, the organizers can identify who is involved in this current network and where the ties between people are strong.2 If community development does not build on current networks, it risks losing credibility with, or even alienating, these important potential community members.

At the same time, community members need to imagine how a community can be more than just a personal network. Well-connected practitioners often believe that they already know the people who matter and sometimes have a hard time imagining the value a more extended network could add—especially if it includes people less knowledgeable than themselves. Imagining a wider, more fully developed community often involves seeing new possibilities. For example, a group of software configuration management (CM) experts had trouble imagining what a community could do until they learned that part of their company was about to adopt a new CM software. Realizing that the community around that software would include people outside their current network, they began to see how the community could become an extremely valuable resource.

Sometimes imagining the community is difficult because it is so different from the team environment people are used to. Even in the early phases of a team's launch, it is possible to define its outputs and performance goals and assign member roles. Because communities evolve toward their potential, rather than define it up front, developing them involves imagining possibilities their members have not yet considered. Unless community leaders and members have the experience of how a community can provide value, this can be difficult to imagine. In fact, many of us have limited or even negative experience with the more commonplace geographic notion of community (see Box 4-1), which may further limit our imagination.

<Box 4-1 here>

Box 4-1

Food for Thought…Life without Community

It may be more difficult for us to design communities of practice today than it would have been fifty years ago. Many of us have had little or no first-hand experience of what it is like to live in a traditional community. Few Americans, for instance, shop for dinner by walking to the corner store, where they run into neighbors and exchange the local gossip. It has become a nostalgic wish to have morning coffee at the neighborhood diner, a place to offer opinions and spout off as well as exchange news. Few can visit a local tavern "where everyone knows your name." The television show "Cheers" is as close as many Americans get.

Mostly this is because the local grocery, diner, and tavern have gone out of business, replaced by supermarkets, fast food drive-thrus, and chain store restaurants. As the population has become more mobile, it has moved from neighborhoods to "neighborhoodless" suburbs. The public places that anchored local communities are, on the whole, absent in the suburbs.

Communities of practice are, of course, different from neighborhood communities. But like neighborhoods, they are a place where people live, think, and converse in the presence of others, in a "public" place. What we have lost in the transition to a suburban society is the knowledge and experience of conversing and thinking in public with others we know.

It is ironic that as we move further away from the traditional neighborhood experience in our own lives, communities of practice are becoming a more important part of organizational life. Perhaps some of the appeal of communities of practice is that they are an avenue through which we can recover some of our lost sense of community.

Planning Communities: A Typical Work Plan

It is tempting to develop a detailed plan of the structure, roles, membership requirements, documentation system, and so forth for a community, as we would for a team. But as we said in chapter 3, planning a community is more a matter of finding the triggers to catalyze evolution than creating a full design. The overall goal in the planning stage is to promote community development around each of the three key elements—domain, community, and practice—by defining the community's focus, identifying and building relationships between members, and identifying topics and projects that that would be exciting for community members.

Determine the Primary Intent of the Community

Communities of practice can start with different intents. For instance, an exploratory study by American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC)1 found four different strategic intents for forming communities: for professionals on different teams or locations (1) to help each other solve everyday work problems in their discipline, (2) to develop and disseminate a set of best practices, (3) to develop and steward the tools, insights, and approaches needed by members in field assignments, and (4) to develop highly innovative solutions and ideas. (See Box 4-2.) Although most communities serve more than one purpose, communities tend to focus on one and adapt the structure, roles, and activities most suited to that intent. Then they fit other activities into those structures.

<Box 4-2 here>

[1] "Creating a Knowledge Sharing Culture" *American Productivity and Quality Center*. March, 1999

Box 4-2

Strategic Intent

Examples of strategic intents for communities of practice include:

Helping communities. Most communities have some mechanisms for community members to help each other solve everyday problems and share ideas. Communities that focus on helping typically create forums for people to connect across teams, geography, or business units and decide for themselves what knowledge to share, how to assess its value, and how to disseminate good ideas to the rest of the community. For example, Schlumberger's technical communities, composed of scientists and engineers, post requests for help or ideas on a customized, threaded discussion; typically several people respond. The intent of helping communities is to make peer-to-peer connections among colleagues.

Best-practice communities. These focus on developing, validating, and disseminating specific practices. Whereas helping communities rely on members' knowledge of each other to verify new practices, best-practice communities have a specific process to verify the effectiveness and benefit of practices. Because best-practice communities have a structured vetting process, they typically rely on sharing documented practices. For example, Ford Motor Company's best-practice replication (BPR) process includes a structure for operators and engineers to describe a new practice and its value, several reviews in which the local best-practice manager and community administrator (subject matter experts) assess the practice's effectiveness and benefits, and a process for ensuring that the practice is distributed and seriously reviewed in each of Ford's 150 manufacturing plants worldwide.

Knowledge-stewarding communities. Like other communities, those that primarily steward knowledge host forums for members to connect, develop, and verify practices, but their main intent is to organize, upgrade, and distribute the knowledge their members use every day. Cap Gemini Ernst & Young estimates that they have 1.2 million documents in their general, unfiltered repositories; 875,000 documents in their discussion databases; and 50,000 documents in comprehensive packs of materials on specific topics. The primary focus of their 150 communities is to find, organize, and distribute this information throughout the organization.

Innovation communities. Of course, all communities innovate by encouraging individuals to develop and contribute practices. But the specific intent of some communities is to foster unexpected ideas and innovations. They are similar to helping communities, but they intentionally cross boundaries to mix members who have different perspectives. DaimlerChrysler's Austauschgruppe community connects 240 world experts from many different parts of the company to assess new directions in research. The community is designed to encourage engineers to be innovative and provides a channel for their ideas to be realized in new or improved products.

Of course, these intents are likely to shift as needs change and the community matures.

Different intents require different community structures and activities. Helping communities, for instance, require forums for informally sharing ideas. Knowledge stewarding requires some structure and roles for verifying the knowledge the community manages. Identifying the strategic intent helps define the scope of the community and the kind of knowledge it will share. When communities begin, trying to play all these roles can overwhelm members. Clarifying the primary intent of the community can make its development more natural and easier for members to imagine. As the community matures, it can expand its focus to include other areas.

Define the Domain and Identify Engaging Issues

As communities evolve, they frequently change the scope of their domain, either by changing its boundaries or completely redefining it. Thus the first objective is to define the domain in a way that will engage potential members, rather than determine its final shape. Frequently, senior managers and support team members identify the overall domains around which the company will form communities. But within that general definition, the community leader and core members need to identify the topical and social boundaries of the domain, whether it will focus deeply on a narrow topic or on a broad range of issues and whether it will address a small group of people or a larger, more diverse membership. We have found three criteria help define the scope of the domain.

1. Focus on dimensions of the domain that are particularly important to the business. Managers are more likely to give support when the community focuses on such issues. This is particularly true at the beginning of a community-building effort, when the legitimacy of the community is at stake. For example, Shell's first communities were formed around technical disciplines. Because Shell is a very technical company, these were seen by both practitioners and organizational leaders as important.
2. Focus on aspects of the domain community members will be passionate about. This assures that the community will be attractive enough to members to grow and develop.
3. Define the scope wide enough to bring in new people and new ideas, but narrow enough that most members will be interested in the topics discussed. When some community members have more knowledge and experience than others in certain areas, it is more likely that knowledge sharing will be valuable from the start. This is especially useful when expertise is located in isolated pockets of the organization. Community members can of course develop new knowledge areas, but at this early stage of development, opening the channels of communication through knowledge-sharing activities has a better chance of quickly creating value for community members and the organization than forging into uncharted territory.

Build a Case for Action

Because communities typically depend on middle and senior managers for funding and encouragement to participate, it is important to offer them well-researched, convincing proposals to build a case for action. This case describes the potential value of the community to the organization and the rationale for supporting it. The case also markets the value of participation to members. The benefits a case for action might mention

include, for example: the time people lose looking for information, the time people spend reinventing tools and approaches that already exist in other pockets of the organization, the speed with which competitors share technology, or opportunities missed by failing to share technology. Even if you have made a convincing argument for sharing knowledge and community building in the organization more generally, it is often useful to build a case for specific communities as well. One organization made a commitment to using communities of practice as its primary vehicle for sharing knowledge across sites, funded a community support team, and started several communities. But even with this commitment, some managers were unwilling to actively support their staff's participation in communities unless they had a specific rationale for each community. This company found that it was necessary to build a case for action on two levels, one for the organization as a whole, and one for each specific community.

Describing the case for action for each specific community also gives the community a focus. Sometimes communities are formed to address a specific problem, such as transferring technology between sites or strengthening technical competence in an area. Occasionally, a company will see communities of practice as stewards of core competencies and will launch them with that intent. Building a case for action clarifies the importance of the domain to the organization and to members.

Identify Potential Coordinators and Thought Leaders

Community coordinators and thought leaders are key to community success. While community coordinators sometimes often emerge without intervention, frequently the management team or a community sponsor will request well-respected community members to assume this "official" coordinator function. Whenever possible, it is important to involve community coordinators in the very early stages of community development to recruit, interview, and persuade potential community members and sponsors. This way, they begin right away to weave relationships among members and establish their community-development role. (See A Critical Role: Community Coordinator.)

In most domains there are some individuals regarded as "thought leaders," people in the organization who are defining cutting-edge issues in the domain, or are well seasoned and well respected practitioners. Involving these thought leaders early helps legitimize the community and attract other key members who will want to know "Who else is coming?" When SAP America started its business-to-business community, it engaged a very well known and respected "business-to-business" consultant to participate. His reputation, both within and outside SAP, signaled to potential members that the community would focus on cutting-edge issues.

Interview Potential Members

Interviewing potential members is a very useful way to discover the issues they share and the opportunities to leverage knowledge. Interviews can also serve to introduce the notion of community. This is the first chance to discuss the community's potential value to individuals and to the organization. For this reason, interviews are conducted more as

discussions than traditional question-and-answer interviews. These interviews not only identify the potential value of the community, they also begin to identify its potential scope, membership, and hot topics around which to link community members.

We found it is very useful to conduct these interviews as a team that includes a support staff and the potential community coordinator. One can take notes while the other discusses.. This gets the coordinator involved early in understanding community issues and building relationships. Because conducting the interviews involves one-on-one networking with community members, it foreshadows one of the primary roles of the coordinator and is often good training for that person.

Connect Community Members

Interviews are great opportunities to begin developing the private space of the community. Rather than treating them as purely data-collection activities, whenever someone mentions a problem that you know others share or might be able to solve, link them together. This makes it possible for potential members to experience the value of community even before the first meeting or visit to the Web site. Beginning by forging one-on-one connections fosters the relationships that will strengthen the community. The interviews for the Turbodudes revealed that many of the people interested in turbidites were not well connected. The interviews themselves, as much as the first meetings, served as the initial way to connect people for mutual benefit.

Create a Preliminary Design for the Community

Creating ideas and models of how the community might work is particularly useful. A preliminary community design might include a description of its scope, hot topics, structure, roles, knowledge-sharing processes, and names of key members. The straw model should be detailed enough to initiate community activity, but not so detailed that it leaves little room for improvisation and new ideas. The community will modify itself along multiple dimensions as it develops. In keeping with the principle of designing through dialogue, community leaders should be invited to help develop the straw design.

A Critical Role: Community Coordinator

Several internal studies at leading companies found that the most important factor in a community's success is the vitality of its leadership. The community coordinator is a community member who helps the community focus on its domain, maintain relationships, and develop its practice. The coordinator's time—typically 20 to 50 percent—is frequently funded through a dedicated budget created for this purpose. Community coordinators perform a number of key functions:

- Identify important issues in their domain.
- Plan and facilitate community events. This is the most visible aspect of the coordinator role.
- Informally link community members, crossing boundaries between organizational units and brokering knowledge assets.
- Foster the development of community members.

- Manage the boundary between the community and the formal organization, such as teams and other organizational units.
- Help build the practice—including the knowledge base, lessons learned, best practices, tools and methods, and learning events.
- Assess the health of the community and evaluate its contribution to members and the organization.

<Box 4-3 here>

Box 4-3

A successful Community Coordinator at DaimlerChrysler

Emile, a full-time community coordinator at DaimlerChrysler, was an engineering supervisor before Chrysler restructured into cross-functional car platforms. Emile began organizing monthly meetings of wiper engineers, about thirty of them, from all five platform teams. He invited vendors to speak to the group about their products and future developments. He organized ongoing projects to pursue innovations and supervised community activities to develop standards for components, select vendors, and propose enhancements that would support product-design activities. For example, he has led an effort to propose and then design a new million-dollar simulation system to help test and develop window wipers under a variety of adverse conditions and car configurations—all of which affect wiper performance. Emile's community is one of the company's most successful, based on member attendance, innovations, skill development, and reputation with the platform teams. Much of this is due to Emile's leadership—planning meetings, recruiting outside experts, coordinating with platform leaders, keeping contributors to the EBoK on track. And of course, networking. Although Emile is very good at organizing and facilitating meetings, he spends most of his time as a coordinator on the telephone with community members.

Effective community leaders typically are well-respected, knowledgeable about the community's domain, well-connected to other community members (they know who's who in the community), keen to help develop the community's practice, relatively good communicators, and personally interested in community leadership. Some of the best community coordinators are mid-career professionals who see networking with other community members as useful for their own career development, or as a way to leverage their capabilities more broadly. (For example, see Box 4-3 for the case of Emile, a successful coordinator at DaimlerChrysler.).

Good community coordinators are knowledgeable and passionate about the community's topic. They are well respected by their peers as practitioners, but they are generally not leading experts in their field. Since a coordinator's primary role is to link people, not give answers, being a leading expert can be a handicap. Good coordinators also need good interpersonal skills for networking and the ability to recognize the development needs of individuals. They understand group dynamics well enough to see when the community is moving toward a factional split or becoming dominated by a subgroup or a limited perspective. Finally, they must have the strategic and political savvy to create a bridge between the community and the formal organization. Given how

different this role is from team and other common leadership roles, community coordinators can easily fall into some common leadership traps. (See Box 4-4 for description.)

<Box 4-4 here>

Box 4-4

Common Coordinator Failures

Coordinators are crucial to a community's success, and weak coordinators can significantly limit a community's effectiveness and long-term growth potential. We have seen four common reasons for coordinator failures.

1. *Time.* The most common cause of failure is that the coordinator simply does not make time to perform the role, even when they have been allocated time for this purpose. They too easily let other things take priority over community work.
2. *Public versus private space.* Sometimes coordinators focus their attention on the public space of the community—such as community meetings and Web discussions—and ignore the private space, where they should be connecting individuals or walking the halls between meetings to see what issues are current.
3. *Networking skills.* Some coordinators lack the ability to network with community members. One coordinator complained that the community was not working because community members were not calling him to ask for help or to submit information to the community's Web site. He just did not feel comfortable going to their offices to "technically socialize" about community issues.
4. *Technical knowledge.* When coordinators do not have the background to understand the technical issues in the community, it is difficult for them to take the initiative to move the community forward. As one coordinator said, "I feel like an outsider. How can I ask them to do things I don't have the knowledge to do?"

Stage 2. Coalescing

When a community is able to combine a good understanding of what already exists with a vision of where it can go, it is ready to move to the coalsecing coalescing stage . During this second stage, the community is officially launched by hosting community events, though community building has already begun with networking during the planning stage. During this time, it is crucial to have activities that allow members to build relationships, trust, and an awareness of their common interests and needs.

The main issue in the second stage of community development is to generate enough energy for the community to coalesce. As we saw in the principles discussed in chapter 3, communities thrive when members find value in participating. But it often takes time for a community to develop to the point that people genuinely trust each other, share knowledge that is truly useful, and believe the community provides enough value that it has a good chance to survive.

- The key domain issue of coalescing stage is to establish the value of sharing knowledge about that domain.
- The key community issue is to develop relationships and sufficient trust to discuss genuine, sticky practice problems. Trust is paramount in this coalescing process; without it, it is difficult for community members to discover what aspects of the domain are most important and identify the real value of the community
- The key practice issue is to discover specifically what knowledge should be shared and how.

Incubate versus Deliver Immediate Value

The main challenge for most communities at this stage is to balance the need to protect the community while its members develop relationships and trust against the early need to demonstrate the value of the community. By focusing solely on relationship building, the community risks being dismissed by both the organization and its members before it provides value. By focusing on delivering immediate value, the community risks a superficial treatment of the practice. Communities often begin with a spike of interest and energy, particularly if the community has a highly visible launch event. However, after the first event, the reality of community work—networking, sharing ideas, maintaining the Web site—typically sets in, and people's energy for the community can fall off sharply. Other commitments pull people away from participating, leaders don't really know what to do to keep the energy alive, people expect—and don't always find—great immediate value. They often interpret this loss of interest as a lack of real value and become impatient with the community.

During this incubation, communities are particularly fragile. Building trust, exploring the domain, and discovering the kind of ideas, methods, and mutual support that are genuinely helpful takes time. . Most of all, they need to develop the habit of consulting each other for help. As community members do this, they typically deepen their relationships and discover not only their common needs, but also their collective ways of thinking, approaching a problem, and developing a solution. 2 However, most people, and most of their managers, have a personal limit on the time they are willing to contribute before realizing value. Because community participation consumes time, most community members experience both internal and external pressure to discover and deliver value soon after the community starts.

Knowing what is most useful to share is often more subtle than it would seem. Sometimes community members can share some information that turns out to be extremely valuable during their first few encounters. But usually they need to understand each other's work, dilemmas, and way of thinking or approaching a problem before they can provide really useful advice. This often takes the form of sharing, thinking about and applying small hints and tips as they get to know and understand each other. After some time spent sharing these "light value" tips community members come to understand each other's work well enough to see gaps in their approach and opportunities to share more valuable insights. During this time they also learn to gauge each other's reactions to

feedback, as well as the depth and style of each other's thinking. The trust community members need is not simply the result of a decision to trust each other personally. It emerges from understanding each other. As one oil reservoir engineer observed, "Sometimes you can share an insight that is so useful it saves a well from going down, but you don't save a well at the first meeting." At the heart of a community's incubation period is the development of this deep insight into each other's individual practice, each other's reactions and style of thinking and a collective understanding of the practice as a whole.

Community coordinators and support staff can be particularly helpful during this stage because most communities need a good deal of nurturing to address these challenges. Some of this nurturing occurs in the public space of the community, by facilitating meetings, managing the Web site, or organizing community documents. But most nurturing occurs in the private space of the community, talking with members one-on-one about their needs, connecting them with others, and finding people outside the core group who can provide needed insights, solutions, or ideas. Nurturing a community at this stage involves helping it to do what it will naturally do on its own once it gains momentum.

Box 4-5

You don't save a well at the first meeting

Knowing what is useful to share is often more subtle than it seems. Sometimes community members share information that turns out to be extremely valuable during their first few encounters. But usually they need to understand each other's work, dilemmas, and ways of thinking or approaching a problem before they can provide truly useful advice. Initially, this often takes the form of sharing problems and suggesting small hints and tips. After some time sharing these "lightweight" tips, community members come to understand each other's work well enough to offer more valuable insights. As one oil reservoir engineer observed, "Sometimes you can share an insight that is so useful it saves a well from going down, but you don't save a well at the first meeting." At the heart of a community's incubation period is the development of this deep insight into each other's individual practice and a collective understanding of the practice as a whole.

Nurturing Communities: A Typical Work Plan

A number of activities can help communities move through this incubation time and coalesce into a well-functioning community. These activities help members balance the need to build a solid foundation with the need to demonstrate value. Although communities vary in the order of these activities, following is a typical sequence.

Build a Case for Membership

Sometimes the focus of the community or the reputation of its members is enough to galvanize interest. Some members of SAP America's business-to-business community participated simply because they wanted to hear its primary thought leader speak. But community coordinators and support staff typically need to personally recruit potential

community members. This usually involves building a two-pronged case for membership: the benefits of contributing and the value of learning from others' experience. Some community leaders and core members argue that making contributions is the cost of getting insights from others. One community's best contributor said that when he started contributing more, the quality and quantity of responses to his requests rose. In some companies, contributing adds to an individual's visibility and reputation. At McKinsey, for example, contributing to a community is one way consultants gain enough visibility to become known to senior partners, thus increasing their chances of being chosen for important consulting projects. But contributing also has intrinsic value. For some contributors, the simple satisfaction of helping their peers and making their mark on the field is a significant benefit. Others say that contributing helps them focus and articulate their thoughts. Building a case for membership not only helps invite people into the community, it helps to bind the core group together and strengthens their relationships.

Launch the Community

There are several different strategies for launching a community and moving it through this early incubation process. One is to start with a highly visible and dramatic kickoff. For example, Schlumberger initiated communities of practice by holding elections. Potential coordinators wrote position papers and gave campaign talks, mostly through the company's Web site, on why they would be good community leaders. A few candidates even debated their competing visions of the community. Once the elections were complete, the organization brought the leaders of the eighteen new communities together for a large kickoff meeting held at a local country club. In other cases, the entire community comes together for a launch event. This approach is most effective when members already have a sense of common identity and are longing to connect. Some of the communities in Shell's New Orleans operation were well-established disciplines that had been housed together before the company reorganized into teams. People missed the interaction and relished the opportunity to reconnect. While a dramatic kickoff does not mean a community will not need to incubate, it can provide momentum that helps sustain it through that period.

Other communities begin very quietly, with little or no fanfare. A community of machine operators and engineers started as a small group that simply met for lunch one Wednesday a month to discuss "screening" issues with engineers and operators. There was no official launch, no announcement—just the coordinator talking with potential members and sending out a notice. While company support staff had been involved in selecting the focus, leader, topics, and members, the community kept its initial work quiet and unobtrusive. The community used its invisibility to build enough trust for operators to become more comfortable discussing problems and ideas and even disagreeing publicly with the engineers. The quiet approach can give the community enough time to develop a rhythm and demonstrate its value before it becomes visible to the organization. This approach works best when the domain of the new community is not a well-established discipline but an emerging issue whose implications and relevance need to be explored.

Which approach will work best depends on the culture of the organization and the type of community. On the one hand, with a visible launch, particularly one with senior management endorsement, more people become aware of the community, its focus, and their own possible roles. Supervisors and managers are more likely to recognize the importance of the community and be more supportive. The community itself is likely to attract broader and more active participation at the outset. A quiet launch, on the other hand, gives the community additional time to bond, discover the true value of the knowledge they share, and develop their own rhythm of meetings and collaboration.

Initiate Community Events and Spaces

Regular events help to "anchor" communities. Immediately after the launch, most communities start to implement knowledge-sharing events, such as weekly meetings, teleconferences, or Web events. It is best to begin these right away in order to tap the energy generated during the launch. Scheduling a series of regular events helps to establish a sense of familiarity and create a rhythm that part of the members' everyday life. As we saw in chapter 3, such events are the heartbeat of the community. They need to be frequent enough to become familiar and routine, while respecting the time availability of members. To create this sense of familiarity, some communities meet in the same space. One community built a library to house their data, which they used also as a meeting space. Others communities create small rituals to establish a routine. A global competitive intelligence community begins its monthly phone meetings with a brief check-in, asking each member to describe in less than two minutes the biggest technical issue at their site. They end every meeting by asking members to rate the value of the meeting and what they can do to improve.

Legitimize Community Coordinators

Most of the work of community coordination, such as networking, is invisible both to community members and to the organization. Unfortunately, many coordinators find they do not have the skills they need to develop a community—especially skills such as networking, listening, and managing conflicts and disagreements. Coordinators thus can find themselves in a bind, facing work that is both difficult and unrecognized. In technical areas, where specific technical contributions are highly valued, the social side of community coordination—networking within and outside the community, facilitating meetings, making telephone calls, and moderating Web sites—can seem unimportant. The organization is more likely to attract talented people to the role and leverage their time and effort when it legitimizes the role by recognizing and rewarding coordinators early in the community's life. For example, one company held a high-status annual meeting for community coordinators and contributors that demonstrated the value the organization placed on their contributions.

Build Connections between Core Group Members

The incubation period is a critical time for building the core group. During this time community coordinators often feel a pull to involve peripheral members and to recruit new ones so the community feels like it has enough members to grow and thrive. But during the incubation period, building membership is actually much less important than

developing the core group. It is through the collaboration of the core group that the community discovers its value; making connections between core group members is the most important networking the coordinator can do. When the core group is cohesive, the community can withstand the growth pressures typical of the next stage.

Find the Ideas, Insights, and Practices That Are Worth Sharing

The main activity for most communities during this period is sharing ideas, insights, and practices as they discover what knowledge is most important and valuable to share. Communities approach this in many ways. Some commission teams to develop technical procedures and standards. Some post material from their personal files in a common space. We found one of the most useful ways for a core group to explore this issue is for community members to begin helping each other solve everyday work problems that fall within their domain. This provides a good forum both for experiencing the value of sharing knowledge and for coalescing as a community. Focusing on current work projects also ensures that the community explores cutting-edge topics, which generates excitement. By being candid and helpful about real problems they face, community members build relationships of trust and reciprocity. Although the community is likely to have an idea of what knowledge and practices will be useful to share during the discovery stage, it is typically during the incubation stage that members discover the true value of their community, which can be quite different from what was originally anticipated.

Document Judiciously

When communities coalesce, members often discover that they have a great deal of overlapping and disorganized tools, databases, and background information. It is tempting to begin by "getting the house in order" and reorganizing all this material, but this generally does not energize the community. Focusing on current problems jump-starts the community with high-energy issues. Heavy documentation responsibilities, particularly at the beginning of a community's life, can easily kill it. They make participating a burden, another action item or chore to do. If documentation is an early goal, it is best to find a way for the community coordinator or core group to manage the effort themselves. IBM Corporation's Intellectual Capital group, for example, contracted with a core group of about eight community members to organize the community's documents in the very early stages.

Identify Opportunities to Provide Value

Because generating value is critical to a community's viability, coordinators and organizers need to look for opportunities to provide value early in the community's life. Linking people who have problems with others who might have solutions, focusing meetings on topics relevant to members' everyday work, linking with outside experts, developing material community members need—all of these can help generate value. When the community develops through the incubation period and community members determine what ideas and insights are really useful, the community usually begins to deliver some real value. During this time, community coordinators and organizers should be able to collect anecdotes that illustrate the value the community provides, to both individuals and the organization. Because community members typically do not develop

the habit of tracing value until later in the community's life, it is important for the community coordinator and organizers to acknowledge and appreciate both obvious direct financial benefit and less obvious value, such as knowing who knows what, feeling more connected to the organization, or having more confidence in decisions. At this stage of development, the more intangible value of a community is often easier to identify. It frequently leads to a more tangible value as the community continues to develop.

Engage Managers

Management support is critical while communities are incubating. At this stage, managers legitimize community participation, direct communities to issues of long-term importance to the business, and protect nascent communities from the need to show immediate value. Engaging managers and supervisors in understanding the role of the community is an important activity at this stage, though it of course continues (with a somewhat different focus) throughout the life of the community.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have identified the steps to take to plan, launch, and nurture a community through its early development. Our approach is quite different from traditional organizational design and implementation. Rather than construct and then impose a design, community development involves helping the community through the tensions of each stage—first, by striking a balance between discovering the natural networks and imagining the value of enriching those relationships; and second, by nurturing strong, lasting relationships while at the same time quickly demonstrating the value of communities. Like human maturation, there are many variations in how communities deal with these tensions. By the end of the coalescing stage, the community has demonstrated that it is viable. It is up and running and has a good chance of survival.

As the community moves into the next stage of development, it faces the challenges of more mature communities—sharpening its focus as it grows and balancing a sense of ownership of the domain with openness to new ideas.

Chapter 5
The Mature Stages of Development: Growing and Sustaining Communities of Practice

Draft

From *"Cultivating Communities of Practice: a Guide to Managing Knowledge"* by Etienne Wenger. Richard McDermott, and William Snyder. To be published by Harvard Business School Press.

During its incubation, the Turbodude community regularly attracted an average of fifteen members. But after about six months, word spread that some of the company's leading geoscientists were engaging in cutting-edge discussions about turbidite reservoirs. Attendance grew, averaging forty to fifty people per meeting, topping off at 125 people.

The meetings evolved to reflect that growth. A small group of ten regular members contributed most to the discussion. A much larger group of about thirty attended regularly. Some of them spoke occasionally, but most rarely, if ever, contributed. Although the people changed somewhat during the life of the community, the percentage of participation remained fairly constant.

After several months of watching the onlookers, the community coordinator felt he should try to get more even participation and considered forcing the issue. First, however, he interviewed some of the non-participants and discovered that many were new to the organization or the field and were using the community to learn, madly taking notes during the meetings. They asked not to participate more actively, because they felt their own contributions would dilute the quality of the discussion. So, to keep discussions focused on cutting-edge issues, the coordinator let the leading experts dominate. Still, the community continued to be a training ground for people new to turbidites. The Turbodudes coordinator estimated that about forty people had used the community as a vehicle for learning about turbidites. The Turbodudes continued to have informal "water-cooler" discussions, with little agenda and a lightly facilitated exchange about technical problems and analyses.

As the Turbodudes grew, they faced many of the growth problems of other communities. Several team leaders, knowing their reputation for probing and thoughtful analysis, decided to use the Turbodudes as an informal review board for projects. But without a real problem, these were more "rubber stamp" presentations than genuine discussions. As a result, the coordinator began screening discussion topics more carefully to keep the focus on truly cutting-edge issues. New members sometimes suggested that the community expand or change its focus to accommodate the issues they were interested in. For example, several reservoir engineers suggested including discussions of other kinds of reservoirs. After conferring privately, the core group decided that this would dilute the focus on turbidites and suggested that the reservoir engineers start another community focused on the reservoir issues they wanted to explore. The Turbodudes found they constantly had to balance their desire to meet the needs of

newcomers and keep the core group engaged by maintaining focus on cutting-edge turbidite issues.

As the Turbodudes matured, they became clearer about the real value of their discussions. They discovered that one of their greatest contributions was to reduce uncertainty in deciding whether or not to develop a site. Exploration involves extrapolating from sketchy data and comparing the site to known geological structures, called analogues. Analogues are important because so little site data is available before drilling a well; they help the geoscientist determine if the oil reserves are sufficient to warrant drilling. Reviewing the site with community members helped geoscientists consider different explanations of their data, sharpen their interpretations of the characteristics of the reservoir, and reduce their uncertainty about developing it. Turbodude discussions of analogues and alternative interpretations of data have avoided unnecessary drilling and testing at three sites per year, at a cost of $20 million to drill and another $20 million to test each well—a total savings of $120 million annually.

The more recognition the community received, the higher the commitment of community members. By the end of the first year, the Turbodudes' core group realized that they were onto something. Several of them started devoting more time to the community, easing the burden from the coordinator. As the core members' commitment grew, they became more willing to take on additional issues related to stewarding their practice. They commissioned small task forces to develop these areas. For instance, in order to be more systematic about the way they analyze turbidites, they began distinguishing between different types of turbidite structures. The distinction helps them understand how turbidite data should fit together and makes it easier to predict what the structure is likely to be. Another project involved helping geologists assess the volume of oil and gas in prospects where there was little or poor data. In the past, geologists' estimates had varied widely. A task force from the Turbodudes researched the estimating methods community members used and developed a standard methodology that is now used throughout the organization. The standard helps ensure that variations are really variations in the prospect, not just calibration differences among geologists.

Although most Turbodude discussions still focus on helping each other, these activities reflect a shift in the community from pure helping to organizing, systematizing, and creating standards of good practice for turbidite analysis. As the community adopted these new responsibilities, the role of the community coordinator changed somewhat. In addition to "walking the halls," which is still his main task, he coordinates these knowledge-stewarding activities. Rather than being made obsolete by the maturing of the community, his role remains important, but with a shift in focus.

From Starting to Sustaining

We may be tempted to think that maturity is a time of stability, but communities, like people, change and grow during their maturity as much as they do during their formation. The ongoing life of an active community, like an active town, is rich and complex. It contains many relationships, many levels of connection, and many subgroups within it.

New members bring new interest; high contributors get pulled away by other assignments; market and organizational needs change; the community's relationship to the organization shifts. These changes pull the community's focus in new directions. Sometimes these changes drive the community to new levels of activity; sometimes they drain its energy. Thus, mature communities go through cycles of high and low energy as they respond, adjust, and reorganize. As communities progress from getting started to becoming a viable part of the organization, the core challenges they face also shift. Instead of overcoming inertia, they must now figure out how to keep their informal peer focus as they become more recognized and integrated with more formal organizational structures.

Because communities grow and change throughout their lives, they continue to need support. If the passion of the core members is strong enough, communities can, of course, sustain themselves with that energy. But like adults, they greatly benefit from reflection and active development efforts as they take on more mature responsibilities. Chapter 4 focused on how to get communities up and running, beyond a launch event, to the point that they are truly viable. This chapter deals with how to help communities grow, change their relationship to their domain, and truly integrate with the organization as a whole. These stages of development we call maturing, stewardship, and transformation.

Of course, some of the activities that were useful in starting a community continue to be important for growth. Mature communities continue to benefit from regular measures of their value and health. Coordinators still need to connect people one-on-one in the private space of the community. They still require help and coaching to deal with the changing demands of their role. And company managers still need to be engaged as the community develops, shifts, and redefines its role in the organization.

Stage 3: Maturing

During the maturation stage, the main issue a community faces shifts from establishing value to clarifying the community's focus, role, and boundaries. Once a community has demonstrated its viability and its value, it might grow rapidly, as the Turbodudes did. When word spreads that the community is effectively sharing knowledge, it can move from relative isolation to an onslaught of newcomers and onlookers. One community met informally in a small conference room for three months. Then, seemingly from nowhere, there was a line at the door for seats. But it is not just physical growth that challenges a community during this time. Shifting from sharing tips to developing a comprehensive body of knowledge expands the demands on community members, both in time and in the scope of their interests. Projects to develop new areas of knowledge draw heavily on core group members, increasing the time they must devote to community matters.

- The key domain issue as a community grows is how to define its role in the organization and its relationship to other domains.
- The key community issue at this stage is managing the boundary of the community, which is no longer just a network of professional friends. In defining new and wider boundaries, the community must ensure that it is not distracted from its core purpose.

- The key practice issue at this point shifts from simply sharing ideas and insights to organizing the community's knowledge and taking stewardship seriously. As the community develops a stronger sense of itself, the core members frequently begin to see gaps in the community's knowledge, identify its cutting edge, and feel a need to be more systematic in their definition of the community's core practice.

During this stage, communities often find that their domain, membership, and practice are all expanding simultaneously.

Focus and Expand

Communities often experience a strong tension at this stage between welcoming new members and focusing on their own interest in cutting-edge topics and expert interactions. Maturing communities often develop a sort of "craft intimacy." Community members get to know each other's style and approach to technical problems. In conversation and joint projects, they discover their strengths and weaknesses and come to appreciate others' contributions, energy, interest, perspectives, and individual styles. They learn who in the community says little but has great insight as well as whose ideas need to be verified. They know whom to contact for what kind of help. They learn who does meticulous analysis and who thinks in broader, more intuitive ways. They can predict which topics are likely to produce a dead-end discussion or a rousing debate, which will invite quiet members to join, and which will stir community members' interest or ire. This intimacy makes community discussions considerably richer. They are not just exchanges of information, but a dance of styles and perspectives.

Growth can multiply relationships and make the community more exciting, but success in number of members can be a mixed blessing. When a community grows rapidly, it often shifts tone. New members disrupt the pattern of interaction the core community has developed. They ask different questions, have different needs, and have not established the relationships and trust that the core group enjoys. Growth often seems to occur just as the community's core members have developed relationships strong enough to discuss really important topics. For core members, growth is more than a disruption. It threatens the intimacy and sense of identity that make the community attractive.

After four months of meeting regularly, one small community of six senior engineers began to grow rapidly. People from neighboring disciplines heard about their weekly discussions. The six senior engineers reluctantly welcomed these newcomers, but within a month found that the informal discussion had shifted from cutting-edge issues to more basic topics in the field. The community no longer met their needs. One week, much to everyone's surprise, the six senior engineers were all missing. The coordinator found them down the hall, meeting in a separate conference room. They had gone underground. To bring them back, he acknowledged that the newcomers had shifted the focus and inquired what they needed. They agreed that community meetings would remain focused on cutting-edge ideas. They also decided to organize a mentorship program for newcomers. This way basic questions could be addressed outside community meetings.

A community resolves the tension between focus and growth when it learns how to preserve relationships, excitement, and trust as it expands membership and when it can maintain helping interactions while systematizing its practices. Resolving this tension typically drives the community to a deeper sense of identity and greater confidence in the value of its domain.

Maturing: A Typical Work Plan

Maturation is a very active stage for community coordinators and support staff. The tensions community members feel can be quite strong. Communities often break apart or reorganize during this phase, so the community generally needs considerable support.

Identify Gaps in Knowledge and Develop a Learning Agenda

During this stage, communities continue to refine their domain. However, their emphasis changes from defining to developing. The domain itself, rather than individual needs, becomes the primary driver of activities. As a community matures, it often finds areas where it collectively needs to develop more knowledge. Identifying knowledge gaps can be a very healthy process. It can induce a more honest discussion of a community's needs and build identity as members develop new areas. Some communities track ongoing development areas and progressively focus community meetings, Web sites, or task teams on these topics. In this way, the community's learning agenda continually evolves. McKinsey communities scan industry leaders and canvas members of client service teams to discover what knowledge will be most useful to develop. Some communities systematically develop their learning agenda by mapping out what they already know, what they need to know, and the projects and resources they will need to fill the gaps. The focus of the community shifts from simply sharing tips and advice toward the broader goal of stewarding knowledge.

One of the ways many communities take charge of their domain and pursue an explicit learning agenda is to commission project teams to explore a new topic area, create guidelines, or identify different approaches to a practice. These teams usually report the results of their work to the community as a whole. These projects can become developmental milestones. A manufacturing community commissioned a team of operators and engineers to analyze a machine that was not operating well. When the team jointly decided to get rid of the machine, it marked an important moment in the community's life. From the operators' point of view, it was the point when the engineers actually listened to them.

Define the Community's Role in the Organization

During this maturing stage, a community often assumes a more important role in the organization. For example, the well-established Turbodudes came to be known as stewards of turbidite knowledge. When someone had a problem with a turbidite reservoir,

team leaders expected their geoscientists to bring the problem to the Turbodudes. Sometimes, however, managers and other outsiders expect a community to take on more responsibilities than it thinks appropriate. The community needs to be clear about the responsibilities it can assume. The division manager asked one community to become responsible for technical quality, formally reviewing each other's work. This made sense, because the community had the technical expertise to conduct the reviews. However, the community was concerned that this would turn them into the "methods police" and undermine their ability to share ideas informally. The community turned down the request. Because this community was explicitly concerned with the relevance of its work to the organization—beginning every meeting with an update from the leadership team representatives on current issues—it was able to preserve its legitimacy with senior management. Because maturing communities begin acting more collectively, rather than as a group of individuals helping each other, they often gain more influence in the organization, as did the chemical engineers described in Box 5-1.

<Box 5-1>

Box 5-1

Taking on Important Issues: A Source of Legitimacy

The chemical engineering community is a small group of seventeen members, peripheral to the core development and production focus of the Deepwater organization. As the coordinator of that community remarked, "When we do our job well, nothing happens." That is, there are no chemically related problems on the oil production platforms. Community members meet monthly for a day-long collaborative session. Three-quarters of the chemical engineering staff regularly attend these meetings, which focus largely on sharing ideas, tips, and advice. But a few years ago, the community began to take on some issues that were important problems for the organization. One was the procurement of chemicals, formerly done by each of the organizational units independently. The community developed a process for supplier management and competitive bidding. They reduced the number of chemical suppliers to a few highly qualified companies and negotiated a collective purchasing arrangement. As a result of their new process, they lowered the cost of the organization's chemical supplies to one-third that of other operators in the region. By taking on an important issue and contributing substantial value to the organization, the chemical engineering community has gained considerable legitimacy—both as a group and as a profession—within the organization.

Redefine Community Boundaries

A maturing community becomes more intentional about involving everyone with an appropriate relationship to the domain—for instance, by linking across departments and geographical areas or by connecting practitioners in related disciplines. This kind of growth often entails some restructuring. Sometimes communities subdivide into topical or geographic sub-communities so people can stay connected to the whole community while maintaining a stronger tie to a smaller group. Because they rearrange relationships,

these reorganizations can be difficult; following natural lines of connection can make the rearrangement much less cumbersome.

Routinize Entry Requirements and Processes

When new members join a well-established community, the process can be daunting for newcomers and time-consuming for current community members. More important, it can break up the existing well-established relationships. A well-defined entry process can alleviate these problems. After struggling to update new members as well as share knowledge and make decisions during its quarterly meetings, DaimlerChrysler's knowledge-management community established expectations for new members. They agreed that new members should be sponsored by a current member and have a session with that member before attending their first meeting to get the background on the community's purpose, history, scope of activities, and norms of interaction.

Measure the Value of the Community

As more newcomers join a community, it becomes even more important for the community to measure its value. Uninvolved stakeholders generally need more traditional and clear demonstrations of value. By the time the community is in the maturing stage, there are usually sufficient examples of value to make a convincing case for its existence and potential members' involvement.

Maintain a Cutting-Edge Focus

As we saw in the core group of engineers that went underground, a growing community's focus can easily shift from cutting-edge to more basic issues. Coordinators need to keep particularly well connected with core members to ensure that their needs continue to be met. Frequently what draws new members at this stage is the stature and activity of the core members. If they withdraw their time and attention, they reduce the appeal of the community for members overall.

Build and Organize a Knowledge Repository

As the community exchanges information, it often creates a body of knowledge through meeting notes or threaded discussions. This information can easily become a junkyard of disorganized insights, particularly if they are organized according to the dates of the meetings. Usually topics overlap, sometimes skipping a few meetings in between; likewise with threaded discussions. They quickly grow into lengthy streams, interspersed with hidden gems. A community librarian should organize the repository according to an agreed-upon taxonomy tailored to the community so members can easily retrieve information. At Johnson & Johnson, they perform a formal analysis of the main activities of community members to determine the relevant categories of documents and the templates of keywords to be used by the search engine.

A Useful Role: Community Librarian

A community's ability to grow from a network of friends into a legitimate, influential player in the organization also depends on its ability to develop and provide access to knowledge, tools, and guidelines about its domain. When communities begin to form, they often discover that they have a plethora of materials that have never been systematically collected and organized.

If a community's practice is dynamic, members soon realize they need to continuously gather, assess, and organize materials to keep the practice repository up-to-date and accessible to practitioners. Coordinators frequently take on this task, but when the community has a large body of information, the task can be overwhelming, and it becomes necessary to hire a librarian to fill this role. Community librarians play more than a backroom, information-organizing role. They are often active community members. Sometimes the librarians are right-hand resources for community members. A librarian might handle any of the following activities:

- Scanning for relevant articles, books, cases, and other resources
- Reviewing and selecting material; writing summaries, reviews, or annotations
- Organizing materials into the community's taxonomy
- Providing on-call research services for practitioners about what resources may be most helpful
- Taking and editing notes at community meetings
- Connecting community members with others experts in the field

Librarians need some basic understanding of library science applications and technical knowledge of the domain they are supporting. They also typically need Web skills, familiarity with online and physical resources relevant to the domain, and interpersonal skills to consult with practitioners and help connect people with shared or complementary interests. Some communities use the librarian role to introduce people new to the domain. It is another way they can become familiar with the practice and its membership.

Stage 4: Stewardship

The main issue for a mature community is how to sustain its momentum through the natural shifts in its practice, members, technology, and relationship to the organization. Declining energy can, sometimes, become a vicious cycle. When other projects pulled away the main contributors to an IT community, none of the less active members took up the slack; for six months, the community went dormant. When one of the leading contributors returned, he had a hard time renewing member activity, and the community never fully recovered. As in any mature life, maintaining freshness and liveliness takes energy and attention.

- The key domain issue in this stage of community development is to maintain the relevance of the domain and to find a voice in the organization.
- The key community issue is to keep the tone and intellectual focus of the community lively and engaging.

- The key practice issue for communities in the stewardship stage is to keep the community on the cutting edge.

Ownership and Openness

Established communities regularly experience a tension between developing their own tools, methods, and approaches and being open to new ideas and members. For a community at this stage, it is not merely about growing up, but continuing to grow when it has already established a solid foundation of expertise and relationships. As they build a common body of knowledge, communities often develop a strong sense of ownership of their domain. They take pride in the ideas they have developed, the guidelines they have written, the direction in which they have pushed their domain, and the efficacy of their collective voice. A community of physicists, feeling that they had some important insights to offer on the technical direction of the company, collectively wrote a white paper and submitted it to the executive management team. They all felt not just a desire to be influential, but an obligation to influence the company's strategy.

To maintain the relevance of their domain, communities need an influx of new ideas, approaches, and relationships. For example, a group of system engineers that had developed a cutting-edge technology felt that it was still the world leader years later, even when other groups outside the company had far surpassed it. A community needs to balance its sense of ownership with receptivity to new people and ideas. Openness is more than simply accepting new people and ideas when they pound hard enough on the boundaries of the community. It involves actively soliciting new ideas, new members, and new leadership to bring fresh vitality into the community. As the Turbodudes reexamine their core model of turbidite reservoirs, they are challenging their assumptions and drawing in new perspectives. However they finally develop their model, the discussion itself brings a healthy search for new thinking into the community. To remain vibrant, communities need to shift topics along with the market, invite new members, forge new alliances, and constantly redefine their boundaries.

Sustaining Momentum: A Typical Work Plan

Actively stewarding a body of knowledge involves maintaining a balance between the tensions of ownership and openness. It is key for the community coordinator and core group members to identify opportunities to take on new challenges, expand the community's focus, and incorporate new perspectives. Coordinators need to be aware of the waxing and waning of community energy and take action to help the community meet the changing demands of its environment in a way that preserves or even develops its own sense of self. Following are activities that can help coordinators in this challenge. The order of these activities depends on the issues in the community.

Institutionalizing the Voice of the Community

When communities reach their maturity, they often feel a need to become a recognized part of the organization and to have a voice in the organization's strategy and direction. As keepers of the organization's core competencies, communities can be critical to the organization's long-term success. Once they have attained a capacity for reliable

stewardship, they are often seen as such. Many organizations integrate these communities into their ongoing budgeting and planning activities, allocating resources such as staff time to community activities. When communities see themselves as a core part of the organization, they often need a structure, such as a senior management liaison or a process for influencing the organization. The community of physicists mentioned earlier not only wrote a white paper, but wanted a method through which they could exert influence on the technical strategy of the company. Giving communities this kind of voice and influence can greatly strengthen them.

Rejuvenate the Community

Because communities naturally go through cycles of high and low energy, most regularly need to rejuvenate their ideas, members, and practices. Introducing new topics, controversial speakers, or joint meetings with other communities or with teams that draw on the community's knowledge help spur interest during the low periods. Sessions with vendors and suppliers can make the community aware of new technology or new practices. One community coordinator has a list of potential supplier presentations about exciting new technology developments. Whenever he sees the energy in the community begin to wane, he brings in one of these suppliers. Sometimes the developments they describe are so dramatic they generate interest among people beyond the community as well, so the meetings serve a dual purpose. For global community members, who have few opportunities to meet in person, just organizing a face-to-face meeting, even a regional one, can rejuvenate energy. When a community's energy begins to wane, it often loses its sense of rhythm. Sometimes the rhythm itself becomes too predictable. Changing the community's rhythm can also rejuvenate the community.

Hold a Renewal Workshop

Whatever method for rejuvenation, communities, like people, commonly experience a "mid-life" crisis—even several of them. They face difficult questions about their direction. They need to decide whether to become a full part of the organization or remain somewhat underground, whether to remain informal or become more systematic in their approach to their domain, whether to keep their current boundaries or shift to include a dramatically new group of people. Sometimes they must decide whether to continue at all. A renewal workshop is like a launch meeting, but it is used to reaffirm the commitment to the community and to set new directions.

Actively Recruit New People to the Core Group

As a community develops, core members often absorb some of the leadership roles. However, core group members also experience turnover. Because people who contribute extensively to a community are very knowledgeable, they generally have many other demands on their time. As the community's topics shift, core members may lose interest in the community's current focus; others simply burn out. Finding new core members is an important task for coordinators of communities at this stage. Besides watching for people who are obvious potential core group members, such as thought leaders and expert practitioners, coordinators look for people who are mid-career, or involved in emerging

topic areas, who would appreciate an opportunity to take a more active role in the development of their discipline.

Develop New Leadership

Community leaders also may be called to other projects, burn out, or simply run out of new ways to engage the community. Sometimes people who are good at galvanizing energy during the community's early phases are less effective at sustaining it. And someone who is capable of leading the community when it focuses on one part of the domain may not be as adept when the focus changes. Coordinators should regularly look for successors. When a community's energy significantly wanes, replacing the leadership can give it a new lease on life. Rather than develop new leaders, some communities regularly rotate leadership to distribute the "burden" of coordination among core members. Rotating leadership also builds stronger ties among core members. It tends to move the community more toward collective leadership. Schlumberger has developed an interesting variation on community leadership. Schlumberger communities elect leaders for a one-year term of office. Annual elections both invigorate the community and renew leadership. Some elections are hotly contested; others are all but shoo-ins. But the election process, with candidates proposing platforms for community development, brings the community's attention to how it could evolve.

Mentor New Members

As communities mature, they often realize the importance of systematically mentoring new members. One community found that new members were constantly turning to a few senior members for mentoring and development, which was creating an unacceptable burden on their time. To spread this more equitably among senior community members, the community took responsibility for mentoring, identified topic areas in which other community members could serve as mentors, and assigned newer members. By assuming mentorship as a community, they were able to regulate the burden among members. Some communities find that establishing a mentorship program helps them keep the focus of community events on cutting-edge issues by providing an outlet for newcomers' questions. At McKinsey, community leaders help junior members identify development directions and steer them to projects that support that development.

Seek Relationships and Benchmarks outside the Organization

As communities move more to the cutting edge of their practice, they often find that they share interests with people and organizations outside the organization. Input from outside the organization is one of the most effective ways to refresh a community's focus. This could involve benchmarking a current practice or using ideas from other companies, associations, and universities to build new knowledge and approaches. Active, mature communities often form ongoing relationships with other companies to compare and refine their practices or develop new ones. These associations are powerful development mechanisms because different organizations bring different perspectives, and often new ideas, to the practice. Benchmarking other world-class practices helps keep an established community from getting complacent about its own tools and approaches.

Stage 5: Transformation

The tension between a community's sense of ownership and its openness to new ideas and people is never fully resolved. It continues throughout the stewardship stage of of the community. When the community widens its boundaries, it risks diluting its focus. New members feel less ownership of the community's topic, practices, and processes. When a community closes its boundaries, it risks suffocating itself. Most communities waver somewhere in the middle, with vacillating levels of activity. But sometimes a dramatic event, a sudden influx of new members, or a fall in the level of energy calls for a radical transformation—perhaps a return to an earlier incubation or growth stage, or even the community's ending.

The radical transformation or death of a community is just as natural as its birth, growth, and life. Even the healthiest communities come to a natural end. Changing markets, organizational structures, and technology can render the community's domain irrelevant. The issues that spawned the community may get resolved. The community's practices can become so rote and commonplace that they no longer require a distinct community. Or, members may develop such different interests over time that there is no longer enough commonality to hold the community together. Whatever the cause, we have seen communities transform themselves in many ways.

- Many communities simply fade away, losing members and energy until no one shows up to community events or posts to its common Web space. A community of project engineers, after resolving some pressing problems in the company's approach to project engineering, slowly lost momentum.

- Communities also die by turning into a social club. A once-powerful community of IT managers became isolated from emerging ideas and influence in the organization. The core group had developed strong personal connections and continued to meet, but their focus slowly shifted from IT issues to organizational ones, and then to their personal lives. Although they felt well connected to each other, they lost their sense of stewarding a practice.

- Sometimes communities split into distinct communities or merge with others. One global community discovered that its topic overlapped considerably with another smaller community. Rather than continue side-by-side, these two communities merged.

- Some communities require so many resources that they become institutionalized. They are transformed into centers of excellence with a small staff that maintains a particular competence and links to the rest of the organization through community members. Or they become actual departments in the organization, taking on all the structures and functions of formal units, including reporting relationships, resource allocation responsibilities, recruiting, hiring, and individual performance reviews. Of course, even as a functional department they can be a vehicle for informal peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, but the institutional structure does constitute a radical transformation of the community itself and of its relationship to the organization.

To close a community with a sense of resolution, like closing any relationship, requires both letting go and finding a way to live on—in memory or in the form of a legacy. Closing a community has an emotional component. Officially closing a community gives its members an opportunity to decide what parts of the community to let go of and how to let other parts live on. Most of us feel regret at endings—opportunities we could have taken, contributions we should have made, relationships we wanted to develop more deeply. Conversations about ending can be difficult for communities, just as they are for families, teams, and partnerships, even when the ending is appropriate. So the natural tendency is to avoid the conversation altogether and either let the community drift apart or, like the IT managers, maintain the social relationships even though the community has lost its practice-based value. There is nothing wrong with this sort of "soft ending" for a community; there is no need to address its closing. A soft ending simply means that the community closed without taking the opportunity to honor members' contributions and pass on the community's legacy.

Communities also die before their time. Senior managers fail to acknowledge their importance, factions within the community make participating more trouble than it is worth, or coordinators and key members attend to other priorities. But the ever-present possibility of death also enlivens a community of practice, just as the ever-present awareness of our own mortality enriches our personal lives. It can help communities remember to focus on those issues genuinely relevant to members. It can remind community coordinators and core members that they are responsible for keeping the community alive. Indeed, deciding whether the community is truly dying or is simply in need of rejuvenation is always a judgment call. And it can help all community members remember that the community only lives on because they give it life through their participation. This fragility can help them appreciate their present experience of the community—its liveliness, engagement, and sense of camaraderie—just as the awareness of death helps us as individuals appreciate the preciousness of the present moment.

Conclusion

Progressing through these stages, communities typically undergo several changes in their focus, relationships, and practice. They commonly shift from sharing ideas and tips to stewarding their practice—building, refining, and expanding the domain and its relationship to other domains. They move from a loose network of personal relationships to a group with a common sense of identity, combining intimate knowledge of each other's approach with a sense of collective responsibility for the domain. Their focus shifts from solving common problems within their practice to systematically exploring its subtleties.

Like individuals, communities go through periods of both relative stability and great discovery. Sometimes these periods of transition are exciting: building new relationships, seeing new opportunities to apply the practice, feeling on the cutting edge of new ideas. But just as often, they feel like things are falling apart, old relationships are losing their value, ideas and approaches are growing tired or less relevant. Just as we experience the

turmoils of human development, so do communities of practice. Leaders feel burnt out or under appreciated. Core members become frustrated trying without success to generate energy. Developmental challenges remain unresolved, or resolved in inappropriate ways that stall the community's growth or ossify its practice. Some communities lose their way and become dysfunctional, a topic we address in chapter 7.

If the bonds of trust and respect and the sense of common direction are strong, these struggles can become temporary expressions of the community's aliveness. For communities, as for individuals, development is not just random change. Like life, it has a direction. For individuals, maturity often means having a richer, deeper experience of life. For communities, stewardship means developing deeper knowledge of their domain. Through a mastery of its domain, a community is able to increase the organization's ability to deal with problems, improvise solutions, and imagine new directions. No matter how narrow the domain, there are always new dimensions to discover. The exploration of a craft can continue as long as the domain is viable. As long as people think about the application of practice, they will develop changes and improvements.